



UWS Academic Portal

Professional learning in Higher Education

Daniels, Jeannie

Published in:
International Journal for Academic Development

DOI:
[10.1080/1360144X.2016.1261352](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1261352)

Published: 03/04/2017

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Daniels, J. (2017). Professional learning in Higher Education: making good practice relevant. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 22(2), 170-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1261352>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Professional learning in higher education: making good practice relevant

Jeannie Daniels

School of Education, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, Scotland

High Street, Paisley PA1 2BE, Renfrewshire, Scotland.

Email: Jeannie.daniels@uws.ac.uk

Professional learning in higher education: making good practice relevant

Jeannie Daniels

School of Education, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, Scotland

High Street, Paisley PA1 2BE, Renfrewshire, Scotland.

Email: Jeannie.daniels@uws.ac.uk

Professionals working in a range of contexts are increasingly expected to engage in ongoing professional learning to maintain their skills and develop their practices. In this paper I focus on professional learning in Higher Education (HE) and challenge the standardisation of professional learning that is becoming prevalent in a number of countries. I argue that professional learning must challenge accepted wisdom, and that this is possible while still adhering to the standards required for professional legitimacy. Developing praxis is suggested as a way of producing relevant and active professional learners while still addressing the professional standards required for quality assurance.

Keywords: praxis; professional learning; professional standards; higher education.

Introduction

Professionals working in a range of contexts are increasingly expected to engage in ongoing professional learning to maintain their skills and develop their practices.

Professional learning (or development) opportunities are now offered across a range of workplaces and with the expectation that professionals will involve themselves in these activities throughout their working careers. There is little doubt that ongoing development of an individual's professional practice is beneficial, both to the practitioner and to those served by her/him, and a substantial body of literature attests to the significance with which professional learning is regarded (Fenwick, 2009; Knight et.

al., 2006; Postareff et. al., 2007; Turner & Simon, 2013).

At the same time, an increasingly managerial professional landscape is producing policies that dictate sets of standards to which these professional learners are expected to adhere in their practices (Blackmore, 2010). That these standards are shaped and influenced to suit policy directives suggests input from those who themselves may be located at some distance from immediate involvement in the practice itself. The result of this dislocation from experience is the imposition of standards that comprise generic sets of principles, that make little concession to individuality or to institutional context or conditions, and that are then applied to a range of diverse practices operating within a profession.

When generic standards are applied thus to meet the demands of professional development a mismatch becomes evident between the practitioner as agent of her/his own professional development and a standardisation of what is deemed good practice – a set of criteria to which the practitioner must adhere to be acknowledged as capable and competent. The tensions thus produced, although widely acknowledged, are ongoing, with the people working in the area of, and delivering, professional learning facing increasing demands to satisfy institutional and policy expectations while providing useful and relevant learning experiences.

This current conceptualisation of professional learning and its interpretation in institutional policy can, I argue, work against the development of innovation and the imaginative application of fresh ideas. A re-interpretation of the standards can achieve some flexibility, but it is the underpinning philosophy of learning for achievement with its adherence to competencies and checklists that is the greatest barrier to the development of innovative and imaginative professional practice.

In this paper I challenge some of the more instrumental approaches to the standardisation of professional learning in Higher Education (HE). The focus of the paper is a professional learning programme for academics that has, as participants, lecturers who themselves teach in a range of discipline areas. I suggest an approach that has potential to facilitate good practice whilst at the same time negotiate and contextualise the requirements for practitioners to demonstrate professional standards. I argue that professional learning must be aimed at improving practice through challenging accepted wisdom (Webster-Wright, 2009) and I provide examples of how this might be possible while still adhering to the standards required for professional legitimacy in contemporary HE practice.

The standardisation of professional learning in higher education

As HE becomes more and more a significant contributor to the global knowledge economy, academics are being encouraged to achieve formal professional teaching qualifications and to continually update these qualifications as a measure of ongoing development of their teaching practice (HEA, 2015; Norton et. al., 2010). Such moves are designed to bring HE lecturers into line with those working in other areas of education – such as initial (pre-service) teacher education - where ongoing professional learning has long been a requirement for continuing to practice.

In the UK and elsewhere, especially in countries such as Australia and in North America, there have been relatively recent moves towards a standardisation of professional learning for HE lecturers and other teaching-related academics. Alongside this, however, has grown a parallel concern regarding the effectiveness of some aspects of such approaches, and the implications for the subjects and their agency in developing their practices. Reporting on the standards imposed on academics in Australia, Collyer

(2014) warns that they are increasingly being constructed as ‘passive subjects of overarching, determining social structures’ (p.3).

Framing professional learning as such suggests that a set of pre-determined competencies must be achieved for successful learning. Competency can be described as a specific ‘performance capability’ in which ‘(c)riterion-referenced measures are used to measure the achievement of competencies’ (Watson, 1991, p.134) and there is a point at which the learning is acknowledged as complete.

In a Canadian context of evaluation of ongoing learning in professional practice, Fenwick (2009) critiques the worth of evaluation designed to ‘predetermine and to regulate the knowledge most worthwhile for a professional to learn regardless of constantly shifting contexts of practice’ (p.230). She questions the formulaic approach to measuring achievement (rather than ongoing learning) in these contexts, asking ‘(h)ow can the professional’s actual learning that occurs in continuing development activities be measured?’ (p.230). Webster-Wright, also writing in 2009, recognises the ‘didactic practices (p.702) of much of professional development in Australia. Yet, despite these concerns and subsequent calls for a different approach to assessing professional learning – one that measures learning as an ongoing activity – this standardisation of measuring professional learning appears to have become more, not less, entrenched in quality assurance policies, at least in HE in the UK.

The UK context and the UK Professional Standards Framework

A set of professional standards, developed in response to calls for formal qualifications for UK university teachers (Dearing, 1997) now exists for those teaching in HE in the UK. These standards have been developed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), ‘the national body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education’ (HEA, 2015), and form the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) addressing three

dimensions of practice: Areas of Activity that address the practical aspects of planning, teaching and supporting learning; Core Knowledge focusing on planning, teaching and evaluating appropriately for the subject/discipline; and Professional Values that demonstrate an engagement with the broader context of HE practice (UKPSF, 2012).

This framework defines a hierarchy of awards, from Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow to Principal Fellow, depending on the breadth and sophistication of learning and teaching related achievements demonstrated. Most HE lecturers work at the level of Fellow.

Programmes of professional learning in HE are designed to map the learning activities and learning outcomes of participants to these standards, and so to provide evidence of learning achievement. Institutional expectations vary across the HE sector regarding the application of these standards, but in the UK – and increasingly beyond – academic staff now find they are required to enrol in continuing professional learning programmes based on this framework as part of their contract, and in line with the ‘widespread assumption that formal training programmes will make better university teachers (Norton et. al., 2010, p.345). The HEA website reminds those already accredited that, if they wish to remain in good standing, they are expected to be

working towards their next award and be performing, or out-performing, their current Fellow descriptor standard. All Fellows should therefore be able to demonstrate compliance with (at least) their awarded level at any given time (HEA, 2015)

and can be called upon by the HEA to provide evidence that they are doing so. In fact, in Scotland – even more so than in the rest of the UK – continuing professional learning is now accepted very much as a ‘contractual and moral expectation’ (Burstow & Winch, 2014, p.203).

The programme and the challenges

This is certainly the expectation that drives the programme for academic development that I became involved with in 2013. At this Scottish institution new and less-experienced teaching staff members are required to complete the PGCert TLHE, a Masters level certificate programme fully accredited by the HEA, and conferring both an academic and professional qualification (more experienced lecturers may select a direct application route to Fellowship). To gain the academic qualification and Fellowship of the HEA participants must demonstrate that they have met the criteria for achievement represented by specific aspects of the UKPSF.

One of the goals in my institution's Corporate Strategy (UWS, 2013) is that 100% of academic staff will have achieved the professional qualification of Fellowship or Associate Fellowship by the year 2020. There are, therefore, clear expectations of staff involved in studying in this programme, and of those charged with its provision. The dilemmas that result, as noted by researchers such as Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009), are significant for many academics. With the increasing importance of recognising and developing their professional or academic identity (Trede & McEwen, 2012; White et. al., 2014) comes an expectation that these discipline specialists become qualified and skilled practitioners in the academic field of HE learning and teaching; to be expert teachers as well as experts in their field of knowledge. When they must also complete postgraduate studies – as is the case in my institution – to address these demands, tensions can develop on issues of priority, manageability and identity as '(p)articipants struggle to come to terms with a new discipline' (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009, p.25). Practice becomes a dual exercise of, as Kemmis (2012, p.84) would put it, curriculum – the content knowledge of their discipline – and didaktik (or pedagogy) – the scholarship of education.

This postgraduate certificate programme is currently delivered part time over eighteen months. It was originally designed as four modules (later converted to three), with each addressing aspects of the UKPSF. The conversion has resulted in some disconnect between the various elements.

Given the task of refining and developing the content and increasing the quality of fully online provision while adhering to these standards, I was confronted by a number of challenges, both to my own professional values and my desire to provide quality – and useful – ongoing professional learning to the HE lecturers I work alongside. The programme had been designed as competency-based provision, and that alone created tensions between how to demonstrate achievement and provision at the appropriate academic level. Fenwick (2009) might have been describing this programme when she explained:

The problem with the model is that it cannot indicate the nature and depth of engagement in learning, or the actual outcomes of engagement in terms of personal understandings and changes to practice. The learning events are not necessarily connected in any meaningful way with the actual contexts and dilemmas of a professional's practice. Nor does the model illuminate relative benefit of different activities in terms of professional learning, or offer recognition for learning within problems and relations of everyday practice. (p.234)

Participants from all discipline areas are required to complete the same assessed work, and, while these tasks are designed to focus on the individual's current teaching practice, assessed work is largely essay-style written assignments: the programme has been developed within a humanities/social sciences paradigm, and through one particular interpretation of the professional standards; one which has been largely adhered to by consecutive programme leaders. The result has been a combination of text-heavy essays and a series of checklists and tick-boxes, such as those described by

Fenwick (2009), who explains, in her critique of their use in assessing pharmacists' competency, that these do not encourage, in individuals, the development of the skills – or even awareness – to identify what they are doing well, what needs improvement, or to be able to see 'their own "blind spots" of practice' (p.233).

The assignments in the first module, Practice and Theory in Higher Education, required a substantial amount of written work that had to be revised and resubmitted at least twice before the final submission.

Written:

Educational Philosophy. Submitted twice (and again in the final module)

Approximately one to one-and-a-half pages.

Revise a Module. Strict guidelines on what to include, and it must be written in essay format. 3000 to 4000 words.

Written/Practical:

Teaching Observation. An HEA Fellow or Senior Fellow observes and provided 'expert' feedback. Written component is approximately 600 words.

(An additional written assignment was removed soon after my involvement with the programme).

There is an emphasis on developing reflection on practice (Schön, 1987), but, as Trowler and Bamer (2005) note is often the case, this concept is not clearly defined or well-understood. Its application in this programme added further to the lack of clarity: one example is the Educational Philosophy assignment in which lecturers found the terminology confusing (the task was to reflect on the influences and experiences that inform their teaching practice), as did the requirement to repeatedly submit this work (twice for formative feedback, then again at the end of the programme). In addition,

individuals were asked to reflect on their learning by responding to formulaic questions on answer sheets, on what they 'know now' that they 'didn't know before'; while reflections on their observed teaching session were restricted to addressing the contents of their teaching plan.

While reflection is certainly useful to help practitioners make sense of why and how things happen, as an evaluation tool to inform an individual's self-assessment of her/his professional learning the value of reflective practice may be over-stated and require further investigation and theorisation (Fenwick, 2009). This is especially true here where the model of reflective practice currently endorsed is an unproblematic one making little reference to context or power in its analysis (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). It is clear, however, that the content and how that is written complies with the standards for HE practice that are endorsed and promoted in institutional policy through the institution's Corporate Strategy (UWS, 2013).

Having the opportunity to redesign this programme offered some flexibility to re-interpret these standards; however, the professional rigour that these standards represent cannot – and should not – be reduced. Participants in the programme must still be able to demonstrate that they are working, or can operate, at the standard required, so need to be able to demonstrate their competency. This was my first challenge. Secondly, in the current structure there was a lack of opportunity to be innovative or imaginative, either from my perspective as programme designer or for the participants of the programme hoping to apply their learning in their practice. So the disjuncture I saw was between sound professional accreditation and good – and by that I mean innovative and inspiring – professional practice.

One positive aspect is the attention given to the needs of students in line with the UKPSF, which refers to students and learners in all three dimensions of the framework.

In addition, students and their opportunities for successful learning feature prominently in my institution's Corporate Strategy (UWS, 2013), as well as in the criteria of all the programme's assessed work. While provision for our increasingly diverse student population requires ongoing monitoring, my focus in this paper is the learning experiences of the lecturers as students; I am conscious that a lecturer's positive experience as a student will impact on their subsequent understanding of their own students' needs.

Although many of the past participants of the programme claim to appreciate their learning experience, reporting it as a useful one, a frequent complaint regarding the activities and the summative work has been around lack of relevance to individual practice. The checklists themselves (some completed by participants, others by members of the teaching team) seemed not to be a major issue for participants, perhaps because they required little additional time to complete. The exception is a lengthy and time-consuming mapping exercise used to demonstrate the evidence of achievement of the UKPSF criteria, and to be completed, using narrative responses, after the programme of study itself is completed. The use of checklists to demonstrate competency suggests that producing the right answer is the proof of professional capability and that competence has thus been achieved and demonstrated. Similarly, applying the standards in the UKPSF as markers of validity means that gaining the attributes is given primacy and might suggest that, once qualifications are achieved, learning for HE teaching is complete.

Certainly there are professions in which, at times, the correct answer or procedure can mean the difference between life and death; between a ground-breaking discovery and a failed experiment; and in these contexts there is an argument for evidence of competency being demonstrated. However, the worth of a skilled educator

is evidenced through interpretation of ideas, application of knowledge and ability to 'read' the learning/teaching context and understand the students with whom s/he is working (Boyer, 1990). For Boyer, 'discovery' is an essential element of scholarship, sitting alongside 'integration, application, and teaching' (p.16), and discovery involves being adventurous and taking risks. These aspects of professionalism can be better assessed through a range of ways other than satisfying the criteria on a checklist. In addition, essay writing seems incongruous as a way of effectively assessing the capabilities of, for example, a scientist who is valued for her/his skills in practical experimentation and accurate recording of results, leading to application of findings in a medical or industrial environment.

Addressing the challenges – developing praxis

This programme is, however, an educational one, so my response was to look for an approach that would satisfy the professional bodies, suit a Masters level programme of study and, most of all, make the content and activities relevant to all of the participants. A fresh interpretation of, or at least a new lens on, the professional standards was needed, and this enabled me to interrogate my own assumptions about what constitutes professional learning (Fenwick, 2009) as well as those assumptions embedded in and shaping the current programme. This would, I hoped, enable me to not only design provision that would serve the purposes described above but would also produce 'good evaluation practice ... to provide different forms of information and raise different questions' (Fenwick, 2009, p.243). At the centre of this approach is the belief that professional practice is an ongoing process of praxis. Praxis can be defined as the process of applying knowledge, reviewing the effect of that application, and refining that knowledge. Unlike the notion of achieving competency as an act with an end point, '(p)raxis remakes the conditions of informed action and constantly reviews action and

the knowledge that produces it' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.33).

The idea of achieving competencies is therefore in direct contrast to the notion of praxis, where theory and practice (production and application) are interdependent and dynamic, producing a state of always learning. Professional learning, according to Fenwick (2009) should be 'unpredictable ... (and) ... rooted not in individual heads or bodies but in provisional networks of people, activity, objects and technology (p.230). In other words, the practice of teaching should be a continuous, changing interactive process. Praxis as action provides an alternative approach to assessing capability, offering a means of both evaluating practice and refining that practice. Because the individual is engaged in her/his act of practicing they are able to see if what they are doing works, and to try different ways of practicing that make ideas work better or differently. 'Praxis ... is thus both a "test" of the actor's understandings and commitments and the means by which these understandings and commitments can be critically evaluated' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.191).

Competencies into praxis: three examples

As teachers in their specialist fields, lecturers are expected to be innovative in their practices, embracing the latest technologies and methods (Maasen & Stensaker, 2010; Wildavsky et. al., 2011). At the same time, academics are under constant pressure to contribute to higher student retention rates, more successful completions and to produce attractive courses that return positive student evaluations. Most academics do, of course, have ideas about both good and innovative teaching but these are not often easily enacted due to these other pressures from within the institution (Norton et. al., 2010). Practitioners face a contradiction in developing innovative and individualised practices, because, as Blackmore (2010) explains:

(t)eacher and leadership practices are the focus of policy, but in highly individualised ways that are expected to produce specific pre-specified outcomes such as standards, attributes and competencies. (p.102)

While innovation suggests originality and advancement, and is certainly promoted in institutional policy, it cannot be easily translated into action under conditions of standardisation and performativity. An inflexible framework works against the ability of the HE practitioner to innovatively apply these standards to their practice. Innovative ideas do not simply appear; they emanate from continuous experimentation, developing, discarding and refining of ideas. In fact, these activities are integral to any process of knowledge sharing. For Fenwick (2009):

Knowledge is enacted and improvised within situational relations ... where ... (p)rofessionals collectively construct, modify, resist and select different meanings of knowledge within the complex dilemmas of the everyday. (p.234)

Simply because policy dictates an approach does not necessarily mean it is being – or can be – enacted (Blackmore, 2010), yet the fact that innovative practice is named as an active philosophy of an institution creates an assumption that it is so. This leads to even more pressure on individuals to perform, since it is assumed they are already practicing in innovative ways. At the same time, institutional insistence on ‘pre-specified outcomes’ certainly does not sit well with the idea of practice as an ongoing, individualised yet social process of learning, applying ideas, and developing knowledge. Professional learning, explain Knight et. al. (2006), is ‘systematic ... an interplay between individuals and their environments. This casts professional development as the development of capabilities that occurs as a consequence of situated social practices’ (p.320). These are ongoing processes that require individuals to take risks, to be adventurous, and, sometimes, to be wrong.

A simple step towards introducing the notion of experimentation was to offer an alternative format for the 'Revise a Module' assignment which was previously a written essay of three to four thousand words. Participants are now offered the choice of submitting their work in essay format or presenting their work by video; in other words, demonstrating their work through voice and action and in a format more aligned to how they themselves teach. Only a brief summary and the list of literature used are required to be written. Although only two participants from a class of eighteen have so far taken up this alternative option, both presentations revealed different ways in which a standard requirement can be interpreted, and where there are opportunities to experiment.

Changes were made to the existing Teaching Observation activity, previously arranged with an experienced HEA Fellow as observer. Informed by the findings of Hendry et. al. (2014), who note that 'teachers can learn from simply watching (and listening to) a colleague's teaching' (p.319), I have developed this into a peer observation in which participants, as well as critiquing each other's delivery, share their reflective comments on each other observing each other's teaching, and of the process of being observed. In this way the activity has changed from one in which participants are told how well they teach, to one in which shared observations produce a reflective dialogue about the process of teaching. The observee is no longer being judged; their capability is no longer in question but the motivation to share and refine ideas for practice is developed as teaching itself becomes the topic for discussion (Gosling, 2002).

The next step will be to develop a project-based module to replace two others. This larger module will incorporate all the aspects of the UKPSF currently achieved within the existing two, and will be studied over a longer period, allowing time for the

development of ideas. Using the practitioner's knowledge and context as the starting point, this larger module will allow participants to engage with relevant learning and teaching theories as they explore different methods, media and contexts of learning through developing a project relevant to their discipline and to their practice. This practice based situated learning approach facilitates the production of ideas and encourages innovation in a supportive setting where any apparent lack of success is seen as an incentive to try a different or improved approach. Willingham-McLain (2015) describes the implementation, in a North American university, of a teaching award as a strategy to effectively encourage such innovation. Whilst no award is given in this Scottish context, the rationale is similar: participants will be assessed not on the success of the project but on their engagement and level of innovation, combined with evidence of the learning they have engaged with, alongside a strategy for the next iteration. All required aspects of the dimensions of the UKPSF are adhered to, thus addressing the major focus of innovation in practice – that of the contribution to student learning (Willingham-McLain, 2015). Being mindful in providing a positive learning experience that benefits students is relevant too, when considering praxis: doing good for the benefit of broader society is part of the philosophical underpinning of the development of praxis as an approach to teaching (Kemmis, 2012).

Rather than be taught passively about learning and teaching concepts, and later expected to use them in practice, this approach constitutes the situated learning that challenges the 'psychologised and individualistic assumptions that professionals' learning is predominantly acquisitive, a-political, conscious and representable' (Fenwick, 2009, p.242). Participants are thus able to demonstrate their capacity as educators, rather than to feel obliged to 'prove' competency. Engaging academics in this way by providing opportunities for them to demonstrate their knowledge within an

learning and teaching context, goes some way to also to ameliorating the resistances that emerge from being required to engage with new paradigms while already struggling with the demands on their time (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

Professional standards and international relevance

Educators working in HE are now also expected to operate in a global context and to communicate across linguistic, geographical, cultural and temporal boundaries (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Accreditation too is being offered internationally, as industries and organisations seek to adopt globally acceptable standards. HE has seen a massive growth in internationalised provision, leading Altbach & Knight (2007) to remind us that '(t)he mechanisms for recognizing qualifications must be national, regional, or international to accommodate the mobility of students and professional labor' (p.302).

The UKPSF is a British framework for maintaining quality in learning and teaching, and promotes a set of standards that were developed for, and are relevant to, higher education settings in the UK and perhaps also North America and Australia. Having said that, the standards are designed to offer students in HE the best possible learning while nurturing the professional practice of the educator, so it would be foolish to completely dismiss their wider relevance. In fact, that they are generic standards means there should be more scope for culturally diverse interpretations. Difficulties arise when the elements within the three dimensions of the UKPSF (Activities, Knowledge and Values) are not interpreted for a more international market in which Values differ or when learner-centred practice is not considered a priority. There are similar potential challenges with Knowledge, since perceptions of how best to learn do differ in international contexts; while Activities are perhaps least problematic of the three dimensions. Sheila Trahar (2011) writes of 'the cross-cultural complexities encountered

in learning and teaching in higher education' and of the need to develop 'bridges of intercultural learning' (p.3) in order to address the internationalised context within which HE is embedded. Interpreting the UKPSF for an international context is possible, but requires an understanding and experience of operating in international contexts plus a willingness to engage with the tensions that arise from intercultural educational provision. The generic nature of the standards, as I have noted above, is not necessarily a disadvantage – although there is some dispute regarding the usefulness of any standardisation of evaluating practice (Fenwick, 2009) – but when developed into learning activities that also assume a generic learning and teaching style and assumed interpretation, they are not equally or fairly applicable across the disciplinary or global spectrum of HE. The situated social practices referred to by Fenwick (2009) and Knight et. al. (2006) that embody praxis, can only be applied if the learning activities and ongoing practices are firmly located in the participant's professional work.

The project-based module is being designed to address this limitation, along with the conversion of the current mapping checklist into a set of activities that will occur throughout the programme. These activities will see participants recognising and recording the practical application of their ideas as the dimensions of the UKPSF, thus linking application, theory and practice. In this way, a process has begun in this professional learning programme to replace the notion of achieving competency with that of an ongoing process of development of good practice through developing praxis.

Conclusion

Professional standards enable us to frame good practice; they can also limit how the concept of professional learning is understood, and how it can be delivered. There is scope, however, within the framework of standards for an interpretation that overcomes some of these limitations. The generic nature and UK-focus of the professional

standards for teaching in HE was seen as a potential barrier: standards apply to many professional areas and similar concerns in other professions are identified in the literature. Despite this, continuing professional learning offers practitioners across the professional landscape opportunities to expand, improve and develop their practices, and to keep abreast of broader social and economic movements that impact on the work they do. Fenwick (2009) suggests that different approaches to assessing and evaluating professional learning are required. Different approaches, she admits, may not necessarily prove to be better, but their usefulness, she explains, lies in 'offering alternative conceptions and questions about professional learning and assessment that might interrupt and open prevailing assumptions' (p.231).

In the case of HE practitioners the expectation is that they will develop their scholarly teaching practices as well as continue to refine their disciplinary knowledge. Combining the two has been found to be problematic. In the programme discussed here, these dual expectations presented contradictions and other concerns that needed to be addressed. The text-heavy format for assessed work was not one familiar to those working in the hard sciences, since essays were not used – or useful – in their everyday work. Whilst the written work did require the appropriate criticality of engagement, the standards for masters level study were not being addressed by the use of checklists and not did these checklists offer opportunities for developing ongoing engagement with professional standards or values.

While there is 'still a place for event-based educational professional development ... it complements, rather than displaces, situated social learning' (Knight et. al. 2007, p.320). To address the needs of a fast changing and fluid global environment educators need to be able to do more than achieve competency in their practice; they need to continually develop their practice. They need skills for reflecting,

reasoning, applying new ideas and learning from their practice and from those with whom they work. These are the skills that will enable them to keep pace with, and respond appropriately to, the fast changes and differences in a global market.

Contemporary professional learning must be a continuous process of developing practice, of 'acting in praxis' (Kemmis, 2012) in one's profession, through:

acting well in response to the uncertain demands of particular situations that arise for the practitioners of different professional practices ... and drawing on the wisdom one has learned from reflection on one's experience in a range of different kinds of circumstances and with a range of different kinds of practical problems that arise in the conduct of the practice. (Kemmis, 2012, p.97)

In this paper I have presented the notion of developing praxis as an alternative to achievement of competencies as a way of producing relevant professional learning and active professional earners while still addressing the professional standards required for quality assurance. Whilst the discussion has focused on professional learning in HE, I believe a similar approach to that advocated here would be relevant and appropriate for other professionals who negotiate their practices within a changing work environment while adhering to a set of standards that can seem rigid and at odds with the realities of that practice. Professional learning that is ongoing and informed by praxis can support the facilitation of contextually situated, innovative, agentic and continually developing professional practice.

Jeannie Daniels is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of the West of Scotland. She leads the Postgraduate Certificate Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, the taught professional development programme for staff, and the recently developed Masters in Higher Education Practice. Her broad interests include socio-cultural approaches to education, internationalisation in HE, doctoral supervisory practices, community-driven learning and women as learners.

References

- Altbach, P & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 290-305.
- Blackmore, J. (2010). Policy, practice and purpose in the field of education: A critical review. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(1), 101-111.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, University of Princeton.
- Burstow, B. & Winch, C. (2014). Providing for the professional development of teachers in England: a contemporary account of a government-led intervention. *Professional Development in Education*, 40(2), 190-206.
- Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical. Education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes: Falmer.
- Collyer, F.M. (2015). Practices of conformity and resistance in the marketisation of the academy: Bourdieu, professionalism and academic capitalism. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56(3), 315-331.
- Dearing, R. (1997). *Higher Education in the learning society: The national committee of inquiry into higher education*. London: HMSO.
- Fenwick, T. (2009). Making to measure? Reconsidering assessment in professional continuing education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 31(3), 229-244.
- Gosling, D. (2002). *Models of peer observation of teaching*, paper for LTSN Generic Centre. Available: <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/> [7 May 2015].
- HEA (2015). *Recognition and accreditation – UKPSF – good standing*. Available: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/recognition-accreditation/ukpsf/good-standing> [04 January 2016].
- Hendry, G.D., Bell, A. & Thomson, K. (2014). Learning by observing a peer's teaching situation. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(4), 318-329.
- Howley A.A., Dudek, M.H., Rittenberg, R & Larson, W. (2014). The development of a valid and reliable instrument for measuring instructional coaching skills. *Professional Development in Education*, 40(5), 779-801.

- Kandlbinder, P. & Peseta, T. (2009). Key concepts in postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching and learning in Australia and the United Kingdom. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 14(1), 19-31.
- Kemmis, S. (2012). Pedagogy, praxis and practice-based higher education. In J. Higgs et.al. (eds.), *Practice-based education: perspectives and strategies* (pp. 81-100). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Knight, P., Tait, J. & Yorke, M. (2006). The professional learning of teachers in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(3), 319–339.
- Maasen, P. & Stensaker, B. (2011). The knowledge triangle, European higher education policy logics and policy implications. *The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 61(6), 757-769.
- Norton, L., Aiyegbayo, O., Katherine Harrington, K., Elander, J. and Reddy, P. (2010). New lecturers' beliefs about teaching and assessment in higher education: the role of the PGCLTHE programme. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(4), 345–356.
- Postareff, L., Lindblom-Ylänne, S. & Nevgi, A. (2007). The effect of pedagogical training on teaching in higher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(5), 557-571.
- Schön, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Trahar, S. (2011). *Developing cultural capability in international higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Trowler, P & Bamber, R. (2005). Compulsory higher education teacher training: joined up policies, institutional architectures and enhancement cultures. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 10(2), 79-93.
- Turner, K & Simon, S. (2013). In what ways does studying at M-level contribute to teachers' professional learning? Research set in an English university. *Professional Development in Education*, 39(1), 6-22.
- UKPSF, (2012). UK Professional Standards Framework. Higher Education Academy. Available: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/UKPSF_2011_English.pdf [2 May 2015].
- UWS, (2013). UWS Corporate Strategy 2014/20. Available: <http://www.uws.ac.uk/about-uws/overview/missions-and-strategies/> [4 May 2015].

- Watson, A. (1991). Competency-based vocational education: is this the answer? *The Vocational Aspect of Education*, 42(114), 133-145.
- White, E., Roberts, A., Rees, M & Read, M. (2014). An exploration of the development of academic identity in a School of Education. *Professional Development in Education*, 40(1), 56-70.
- Wildavsky, B., Kelly, A.P., & Carey, K. (2011). *Reinventing higher education: the promise of innovation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willingham-McLain, L. (2015). Using a scholarship of teaching and learning approach to award faculty who innovate. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 20(1), 58-75.